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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 000709

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: FEW ABUSES AT JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES MEMORIALS

REF: A. 06 TASHKENT 741

[1](#)B. 05 TASHKENT 873

Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On April 2, Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Uzbekistan encountered far less harassment than in the past two years in the course of their annual memorial services commemorating Jesus' death. American representatives who attended services at the organization's sole registered local congregation in Chirchik reported heavy turnout, as well as a delegation from the local mayor's office. However, police disrupted at least five memorial services in three cities, eight members in Yangiyul were taken into custody for several hours, and one worshiper in Samarkand was reported beaten by a police officer. Embassies monitored four Tashkent services. The Uzbek authorities were clearly making an effort to impress in the first months after Uzbekistan's designation as a Country of Particular Concern. In some cases, the effort was only half-hearted. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On April 2, members of Jehovah's Witnesses held worship services commemorating the death of Jesus, the organization's most important annual event. Local police disrupted memorial services in several cities in both 2005 and 2006, detaining hundreds of worshipers. This year, the organization took a series of precautions to avoid disturbances. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives discussed the observance extensively with Uzbek officials both in Uzbekistan and at Uzbek embassies abroad in order to inform the officials about the nature of the observance and to disabuse them of the idea that the event is used as a venue for proselytizing. Unregistered congregations across the country, in contrast to previous years, staggered the times of their worship services, which are normally held immediately after sunset. Many groups gathered in smaller numbers than in past years, and at different locations, in order to avoid excessive police attention.

[1](#)3. (SBU) This year's memorial was the first since Uzbekistan's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom. The Jehovah's Witnesses' Associate General Counsel told Poloff that the Uzbek Ambassador in Washington, Abdulaziz Kamilov, was particularly cognizant of this fact, and asked what the Uzbek government could do to encourage the United States to lift the CPC designation. The Associate General Counsel specifically requested that the government allow the annual memorial services to proceed without incident. However, he said, Uzbek officials warned the organization that only the memorial services in Chirchik had legal sanction, as the Chirchik congregation is the only registered branch. All other local groups would gather at their own risk.

14. (C) The Associate General Counsel reported that services in Chirchik proceeded without incident. He accompanied a seven-person foreign delegation consisting of two Italians, one Belgian, three Americans, and one Finnish national. He said that a total of over 700 worshipers attended three separate services there, one of which was conducted in the Uzbek language. He said that a three-person delegation from the Chirchik mayor's office attended as well, and in the course of the services asked the foreign representatives what more the local government could do to assist them. He noted, however, that the delegation's hired driver later reported that an unidentified man, possibly an undercover security agent, questioned him during the services as he waited outside the grounds, asking about the identities of the foreign visitors and the nature of their trip.

15. (C) Four emboffs attended four memorial services in Tashkent. Two services began at 7:00 p.m., while one began at 8:00, and another at 9:00. The 9:00 p.m. service was held at the home of an Embassy consular FSN whose wife is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Church members reported that some homes of known Jehovah's Witnesses were under surveillance most of the day. Police interrupted the 9:00 service twice. During the first visit, a small group of officers, including one in civilian attire, came ostensibly to verify the host's weapons licenses. (Note: The consular employee, an avid hunter, keeps licensed firearms in his apartment. End note.) The group soon left, and approximately 30 minutes later, four uniformed officers claiming to be from the Internal Affairs Ministry's Entry, Exit and Registration Division (OVIR) came to check the identities of the visiting emboffs. The worshipers told emboffs that the officers behaved much more politely than in

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the previous two years when they had raided the same apartment during memorial services.

16. (C) Amciti Jehovah's Witnesses representatives reported to emboffs that according to preliminary reports from congregations around the country, memorial services proceeded largely without incident, with a few notable exceptions. Samarkand members said that police forcibly dispersed two of the three services held there. In one instance, a man in attendance was beaten on the head by a police officer, resulting in serious injury. In the town of Yangiyul in Tashkent Province, ten police officers disrupted one memorial service and took eight worshipers into custody for several hours before releasing them at 1:00 in the morning. Police visited two memorial services in Tashkent, including the one which emboffs attended, but allowed the services to continue after brief checks. In other cities, police surveillance was widely reported, but in many cases, police reportedly attempted to visit memorial services, but came either at the wrong times, or to homes where services were not being held. Thus, the Associate General Counsel speculated that the decision to stagger the times of worship services and to hold them at different locations had helped members to avoid much of the police disruption that otherwise might have occurred.

17. (C) Comment: While all the information is not yet in, this year's memorial services may be seen as a good news/bad news story. It appears certain that the Uzbek government, eager to put on a good show for Western observers in the wake of CPC designation, made a conscious effort to restrain themselves from the harassment of the past two years. However, the effort was clearly half-hearted in some cases. The Jehovah's Witnesses may have avoided some harassment simply by virtue of good planning.

PURNELL